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CHARLIE REGISTER

A Scholar's Life

A.V. HUFF RETIRES AFTER AN ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER AS A TEACHER, ADMINISTRATOR AND HISTORIAN.

By Jim Stewart

A.V. Huff, Jr., is a true son of the South, his roots deeply embedded in the soil of the South Carolina midlands.

He has spent virtually his entire life in his native region, taking a brief break in the late '50s and early '60s to study theology for a year in Edinburgh, Scotland, before moving to New Haven, Conn., to earn a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Yale.

At first, the ministry seemed to be his calling, and after finishing at Yale he returned to the Palmetto state to work at a Methodist church in Columbia. But he soon realized that he was spending an excessive amount of time writing reports and attending committee meetings — “two things I hated,” he says now.

What he wanted was to read, teach and write about history, particularly that of his home region. As a child he had delighted in hearing the stories told by Civil War veterans, and an inspiring teacher and family friend, Arsinoe Foster Geiger, also nurtured his interest in the past. During

his undergraduate years at Wofford College, he earned high honors in history and studied under two influential historians: Charles Cauthen, a South Carolina specialist, and Lewis P. Jones, a Southern history expert.

So he decided to say goodbye to the parish ministry and head to Duke University for graduate study. There he encountered yet another influential historian, Robert Woody, co-author of the groundbreaking *South Carolina During the Reconstruction*. Huff would later co-edit a book of essays honoring Woody, and the historian's photograph would occupy an honored place in Huff's Furman office.

After receiving his master's degree from Duke, Huff began looking for a teaching job while he completed his Ph.D. It just so happened that a Southern Baptist school in his home state was in need of a card-carrying Methodist to come in and stir things up.

Which, on occasion, the young scholar was apparently willing to do. Bill Lavery, who joined the Furman history department the same year as Huff (1968), recalls once seeing his colleague, dressed in “full priestly regalia” and carrying a chalice, hurrying down the hall to a humanities class.

“What are you doing?” Lavery asked. “I’m saying mass,” said Huff in passing. Then he paused, turned back to Lavery and said, “That’ll hold our Baptists for a while.”

For the most part, though, Huff has tended to behave himself while bringing history to life for thousands of Furman students.

Eric Spitler '81, deputy director of the Office of Legislative Affairs for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation in Washington, D.C., got a double dose of Huff, first as a student and again, almost 20 years later, as a participant in Furman's Executive Week program. Spitler says he enjoyed Huff's classes as an undergraduate

but gained “a new perspective” on his former professor during Executive Week.

“In one class, he was able to weave a seamless lecture on influences in New South society that ranged from religion to education to shape note singing,” Spitler says. “It was at that point I recognized what a talented educator he is and how fortunate his students have been to learn from him.”

John Block, who also joined the history faculty in 1968 as the third member of the trio dubbed the “Young Turks” by department chair Albert Sanders, echoes Spitler’s comments and adds, “Students have always found A.V. very approachable. I can’t recall hearing one say anything derogatory about him — unless you count that he was slow getting their papers back.”

No doubt Huff’s success in the classroom is helped by his affable, easy-going manner. A master blend of Old South gentility and New South progressivism, he quickly puts people at ease.

Yet his talent as a teacher is equaled, if not surpassed, by his eminence as a historian.

The author or editor of six books, Huff is known for his careful, exhaustive research and fluid writing style. His canon includes the highly popular middle school textbook, *The History of South Carolina in the Making of a Nation* (1991), and his *Greenville: The History of the City and County in the South Carolina Piedmont* (1995) is described by Walter Edgar, a distinguished historian at the University of South Carolina, as “a model county history.”

As Edgar points out, “A.V., like all too few academic historians, has always known that for history to be history, for it to be known and appreciated by those whose story it really is, that it must be engagingly written. His works are unmarred by historical or theoretical fads and fancies.”

Nor does Huff operate as an ivory tower historian, content to observe and comment from the sanctuary of his office. He has worked tirelessly with historical groups in the state and the region to ensure that the lessons of the past are not lost on future generations.

Throughout his academic career, his passion for his discipline has been matched by his interest in the welfare of the university as a whole. Having held various leadership positions during his Furman career — department chair, faculty chair, American Association of University Professors president — he became, in 1995, vice president for academic affairs and dean. For the last eight years, while helping to build the

faculty of tomorrow, he has overseen significant growth in the university’s research and internship programs, major improvements in facilities and resources, and a substantial expansion of interdisciplinary offerings.

Now, as of the close of Commencement May 31, Huff will have more time to pursue the scholarly interests that he put on hold while attending to his myriad duties as dean. Having completed 35 years at Furman, he has decided to retire.

He plans to enjoy more time with his family — Kate, his wife of 31 years; son Vernon ’97 and his wife, Kara Stewart Huff ’95; and daughter Mary ’99 and her husband, Andrew Henderson. But he also looks forward to the chance to manage his own schedule and to resume work on such projects as a study of Methodism in the South and an examination of efforts to diversify the South Carolina economy since World War II.

As he steps down from the senior administration, he believes he is leaving the academic program in good shape for his successor, Thomas Kazee (see page 28). “I think it’s clear to all of us that since World War II, Furman has followed a steady trajectory in improving its academic quality,” Huff says. “We’ve been constantly raising standards and strengthening the faculty. These were areas I was committed to and wanted to work with more closely, and I’ve always felt that if you don’t leave a place better than you found it, you haven’t fulfilled your mission.”

He is particularly pleased with the university’s recent success in developing interdisciplinary courses. More and more of today’s faculty, he says, are trained in interdisciplinary modes and are looking for opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and share their expertise with students. During Huff’s tenure as dean, the university has introduced interdisciplinary concentrations in classical studies, environmental studies, Latin American studies and women’s studies, with a fifth, in African-American studies, under review.

As for the faculty, Huff is impressed with the talents of the new, young instructors hired during the last eight years. “Furman has always been fortunate to have an exceptional group of teachers and scholars,” he says. “What we’ve worked to do is ensure that the tradition continues, and I believe that the younger faculty in place now will lead us to yet another level of excellence.”

He also points out that he arrived at Furman just when the university was beginning to pursue the dream of “greatness by national standards” espoused by President Gordon W. Blackwell. Huff says that some at the time may have thought Blackwell was overreaching, but he adds with pride, “We’re there. It’s happened. And it was great to be part of it.”

Today, he is ready to return to a less stressful life — one that will afford him time to pursue his interest in the paradoxes of his native region. As he says, “With the South, we’re talking about a people that are typically warm-hearted and friendly and generous — and yet, at the same time, that can be extremely violent and mean-spirited and hateful.”

From his perspective, these inconsistencies make the South a fascinating place. He echoes William Faulkner as he says, “In this little postage stamp of soil lies all the great questions of human existence.”

Huff has seen the inconsistencies firsthand. His grandfather belonged to the Ku Klux Klan — “I have his membership card,” he says matter-of-factly — and yet spent untold amounts of money sending the children of black sharecroppers north to attend school because they couldn’t get a good education in the segregated South.

Huff also recalls that, as a child, his family employed an African-American housekeeper whom they dearly loved — and yet he was bitterly scolded for eating with her family.

“I had stepped over a line that I didn’t know existed,” he says. “It didn’t make sense to me then, and I’ve been trying to figure it out ever since.”

Perhaps now, he’ll have the time to do so. ●

At his retirement dinner April 25, A.V. Huff received the Order of the Palmetto, the highest civilian honor awarded by the state of South Carolina. In addition, it was announced that Furman has renamed its Center for the Study of Piedmont History in honor of Huff.

Since the fall of 1999 the center has sponsored the history department’s internship program, placing majors at local historical sites and museums. An endowment honoring Huff has been established to support expanded programs for the center, including summer research opportunities for history majors.

To contribute to the fund, or to learn more about the Huff Center for Piedmont History, contact Betsy Moseley ’74, director of planned giving, at (864) 294-3491 or by e-mail, betsy.moseley@furman.edu.